

Integrity & Authenticity

I've often heard it said that integrity is doing the right thing when nobody is looking. While I agree that a person can have integrity when nobody is around, I think using that as the definition of integrity is too limiting. Integrity has to be measured by what we can observe, not just by what someone might do when nobody is around to see it. I think the best definition of integrity is, doing what you say you're going to do. It's that simple. In the book of Acts, chapters 4 and 5, we see contrasting accounts of authenticity within the church; the integrity of Barnabas followed by the lack of integrity of Ananias and Sapphira.

Acts 4:32-37, ***"And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."*** Barnabas had voluntarily sold a piece of land and used the amount of the sale to help the poor in Jerusalem. Believers weren't required to sell anything, but they were moved by compassion and unity to help other believers that were in need. A piece of land that wasn't a place of primary residence was the ideal thing for Barnabas to sell and donate freely. Laying the offering at the feet of the apostles, acknowledged that the apostles had governing authority over the Church. Likewise, this act of humility communicated that what was being offered was obtained honestly and in good conscience. Laying the gift at the apostles feet also served as a sign of trust, saying, *"I trust that you will do right by God and by others in how you distribute this money that I've sacrificed."* Barnabas had a great heart, and his offering was well received. Perhaps Barnabas was the first to present the offering in this manner, which is why others followed in kind.

Next, we see an offering that was given in contrast to the way Barnabas gave his. Here's the account of Ananias and Sapphira's offering, from Acts 5:1-2, ***"But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet."*** Let's unpack the details to see how a lack of integrity is what's in view here.

Ananias and Sapphira are a married couple in the church. They are Christians, and we know this, otherwise the contrast between their offering and that of Barnabas' has no significance. If there weren't believers, the apostles might expect a lack of integrity. But, being believers and understanding who the Holy Spirit is in their lives, their sin is magnified and they are fittingly lectured about the Holy Spirit; a rebuke perhaps less fitting for a non-believer. Chapter five begins with ***"A man named Ananias,"*** as it was Ananias alone, without his wife, that came before the apostle Peter, and Ananias laid the offering at Peter's feet. Though Ananias is alone here (Sapphira doesn't show up in the scene until about three hours later), he operated in agreement with his wife to sell some property; ***"Ananias, with his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of property."*** They conspired together to keep back a portion of the profit, while agreeing to pretend that the whole amount of the profit is what was laid at Peter's feet. The phrase ***"kept back"*** demonstrates that they acted as though they'd given 100% from the sale. Ananias came to Peter with the intent to deceive, and Ananias did so, ***"with his wife's full knowledge."***

The couple's lack of integrity is about to be exposed!

Ananias chose to present himself before the church as an incredibly generous person; wanting all to see the great sacrifice from he and his wife. In their pride, they wanted to appear as something they weren't. What they claimed, and what they really did, were two different things; a lack of integrity. Was it the love of money that compelled this evil behavior? The Scripture doesn't make it clear as to their exact motive. We know loving money does crazy things to people. In a 1991 Book by James Patterson & Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth*, people were polled and asked, "What would you do for ten million dollars?" 25% of the individuals polled said they would abandon their family. 23% said they would become prostitutes for a week. 16% said they would leave their spouse. 7% said they would murder a stranger. 3% said they would put up their children for adoption. If nothing else, this book reveals the authenticity of what people really value.

We can be fake before men, but not before God. After Ananias lays the money at Peter's feet, Peter says, ***"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God. And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it."*** We need to remember that our hearts and minds are transparent before God. ***"Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land?"*** The Holy Spirit had revealed this truth to Peter. How else would Peter have known that Ananias was deceitful about the offering? Apparently, Ananias thought God couldn't detect the lie, or, at least he'd hoped to deceive Peter, but forgot that Peter was operating under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

"While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?" Before the Lord exacts judgment, Peter confirms the charges before Ananias. Here, Peter reiterates that the house was owned solely by Ananias, and not jointly owned by another party. This infers that there'd be no reason for Ananias to not have all of the proceeds. Additionally, after it was sold, the money was always under Ananias' control, so again, no reason to not have all the proceeds present.

Here are some things to consider about Ananias' choice. What's to be gained by acting more charitable than you really are? Who is Ananias and Sapphira aiming to impress? Too often people promote their charity in order to get the applause of men. You see this today on social media when someone posts a video of themselves giving a homeless guy a sandwich. These are vain examples of phony virtue. A good question for all to consider is, *"Where am I appearing to be authentic, where I'm really a fraud?"* Or, who do I need to pull aside and say, *"I've not been transparent with you."*

Peter continued, ***"Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."*** Now keep in mind, giving to the poor in Jerusalem was not a command, and neither was selling one's property. These things were acts of charity and completely voluntary. If Ananias and Sapphira wanted to sell their property and give half of the money to the poor, that would have been just fine. They could have offered 50% of the profit and laid it at Peter's feet. The point here is that they pretended that what was donated was 100% of the sale price, which was a lie, hoping to make themselves appear to be extremely generous. They thought they could, ***"lie to the Holy Spirit,"*** and God made sure Peter knew. Once the charges were confirmed, and Ananias knew full-well that he was guilty, it was only then, that the Lord saw fit to execute punishment. ***"And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last."*** Peter communicated the charges, and God delivered the punishment. Ananias wouldn't get the chance to receive any of his valued praise from the Church, instead, his judgment was swift.

“Great fear came over all who heard of it.” At this point, it was those in the church who heard. The fear they were experiencing wasn’t an unholy fear, but rather a right-minded fear; a reinvigorated reverence for the Lord. Afterall, ***“Do not be afraid,”*** is the most repeated command in all of Scripture. Here, we see a healthy fear, so as to caution the Church against more hypocrisy. We know this news hadn’t left the church yet, otherwise Sapphira would have heard about it. As it appears, nobody left the church gathering except some young men who took Ananias’ body outside to bury it. Next, we see what happened to Sapphira.

Acts 5:7-8 says, ***“Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, ‘Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?’ And she said, ‘Yes, that was the price.’”*** The fact that it had been three hours since Ananias died, and his wife didn’t know, indicates that the news hadn’t yet left the church. This also indicates a sufficient amount of time for her to have reconsidered her position, and possibly decided to repent and to report the lie. However, she chooses to stick with her deception. ***“And his wife came in,”*** Sapphira came to where the church was gathered, likely wondering why Ananias hadn’t come home yet, or, herself being three hours late and now hoping to find Ananias being honored for their charity, and hoping that she’d also be celebrated. However, before making her way into the gathering, Sapphira is stopped by Peter.

“Tell me,” Peter is giving her a chance to own her sin. Being questioned should have been an obvious clue that something was up. The confrontation should have compelled her to repent. Notice that neither Ananias nor Sapphira repent. ***“Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”*** Sticking to her lie, she’s about to pay the consequence. ***“Then Peter said to her, ‘Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.’ And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.”***

At quick glance, one might read this account and conclude that God is not merciful. However, God’s mercy is on display here. The details reveal how the judgment of God on Ananias and Sapphira were actually examples of mercy killings. Let’s first look at how God had mercy on Ananias. Ananias died immediately, without suffering, and was immediately in heaven with Jesus. He died without time to fear that he’d abandoned his wife. He died without facing any ridicule by others. As well, God had mercy on Sapphira. ***“Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door.”*** The Lord is merciful in that He first has Peter articulate Ananias’ death & burial, which lets her know what had happened to him, as she was surely fearing his absence and wondering why she stood alone in this trial. Sapphira, like Ananias, also dies immediately and into the presence of the Lord, and she passes painlessly and without exposure to public ridicule.

Mercy is also shown on the Church, by removing the leaven from within the church. Galatians 5:9 says, ***“A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.”*** Leaven is the yeast that causes dough to rise when making bread. The analogy about leaven, that Jesus taught and that Paul reiterates in Galatians, is that the things that corrupt the Church need to be quickly addressed and removed. In the instance of Ananias and Sapphira, God was quick to expel the hypocrisy in Jerusalem’s young growing Church. It is worth noting that God judges sin severely at the beginning of new periods of dispensation in history. Dispensations are new times when God operates differently than before. Not that God changes, but as the Church moves throughout history, God has different stages for the Church to know and engage Him further, and experience new things from Him. For example, right after the tabernacle is built, God killed Nadab and Abihu for trying to present “false fire.” Also,

after Israel entered the promised land, God killed Achan for hiding and lying about his false idols. Here in Acts 4, at the start of a new dispensation where the Holy Spirit indwells believers, God's judgment served as an early warning about trying to deceive the Spirit of God.

Acts 5:11 continues, "***And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.***" The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira magnified their lack of integrity. Again, after Sapphira dies, the same healthy fear as from Ananias' death, has now increased, but "***over all who heard,***" differentiating that even those outside the church had heard the news, establishing a healthy fear in the community, so as to not belittle the church's ministry or the apostle's leadership.

Lacking integrity isn't an accident. People plan to be inauthentic; one plans to live without integrity. Ananias planned this out ahead of time, "***with his wife's full knowledge.***" Integrity is a choice. The Bible says to simply let your "Yes" be "Yes" and your "No" be "No", anything beyond this is evil, Matthew 5:37. Do what you say you're going to do.

What's the value of authenticity? It allows people to know you. It allows people to minister to your real needs. It allows all the "one another" commands of the Bible to be satisfied (love one another, pray for one another, bear with one another, etc.). As you chose to be authentic, it creates space for others to be authentic as well. It's contagious!

What's the risk of authenticity? Our weaknesses become exposed and we're vulnerable. We reveal that we need help and that we aren't self-sufficient. Christians have to risk authenticity, as it's the only way we can live with integrity. The good news is that when we're authentic, we magnify our need for God, and give Him glory! As a Church, authenticity builds each other up, and our hypocrisy leads to our demise.

When considering Ananias and Sapphira, what matters most? Is it what others assume, or what God knows?